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Contemplating Plato's bust and perhaps your problems are (from left) John Stuart Mill, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, the Dalai Lama, Friedrich Nietzsche, Simone de Beauvoir.

The philosophy fix

In many cases, people don't need a shrink, they just need to think, says ex-Montrealer Lou Marinoff. He's a pioneer counselor in what's called the philosophical practice movement

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

"A life unexamined is a life not worth living."

Aristotle's bromide is to philosophy as "I can't believe I ate the whole thing" is to Alka-Seltzer. It's the big enchilada of the deep-thinking biz.

It just so happens that I'm examining my life big-time these days, mired in (deep?) reflection. No choice in the matter: Having been diagnosed with diabetes and associated illnesses, I finally hit a wall with drinking, drugs, Booze it up and I die. But bad habits die hard, and I've still got an addictive personality, right? (One recovering alcoholic journalist once said I was "toxic" and I thought, like Bart Simpson, "Yeah, and proud of it!")

In group therapy for addictions, I'm at the kneebone-connected-to-the-jawbone stage of "self-discovery." Will I ever learn? I've always said mañana to pressing problems. Am I the Great Pretender or the Great Procrastinator, or both? To be or not to be – aw, nuts!

Which brings me to the book Plato Not Prozac! Applying Philosophy to Everyday Problems, by Montreal-born Lou Marinoff, who is also president of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association, headquartered in New York. Flipping through its pages in a store, I dismissed it as just another self-help book. I hate self-help books, with their anonymous case histories, platitudes, and E-Z solutions. Yet who am I to pass judgment? I resisted getting "help" until it was (almost) too late. Just stubborn and stupid, I suppose. Unconscious, too.

The jacket-flap flibber of Plato Not Prozac has all the earmarks of a self-help tome: "Dr. Marinoff's signature five-step PEACE process shows you how to identify your problem (P), express your emotions constructively (E), analyze your options (A), contemplate a philosophy that helps you choose and live with your best option (C), and renew your personal equilibrium (E)."

> **Philosophy as problem-solver: it's "a time-tested guide to the art of living."**
> *Lou Marinoff*

Then, out of the blue, I received a letter from my sister in London, England: "I have just three words for you: Plato Not Prozac!" Immediately, I took offence: What makes her think I'm on Prozac? I know I've led a fugged-up life, but it's been real (sorta). "I really think you should make the effort to get involved with this," my sister wrote. By "this," she meant what is known as the philosophical practice movement, two decades old and pioneered in North America by Marinoff, whom she'd met at an event in London. "Lou's a really lively, opinionated and altogether fun guy and you'll be doing him, and probably yourself, a big favour!" Hey, how does she know what's good for me?! Then again, when did I ever accept advice? I guess I've always been "in denial." I used to laugh at such psychobabble terminology; I don't laugh (as much) any more.

Still, maybe Marinoff and sis were in cahoots, selling me something (snake oil?); the familial relationship might make it unethical for me to write this piece, which could be seen as promo for the book. (Hey, I'm not as dumb as I seem!) "So act swiftly before someone else does!" my sister advised. Now, that did grab me, much as I was reluctant to admit it. If my life would not be richer encountering this book and its author, at least my book account would swell slightly by writing about him, no small deal for an always-broke freelance writer.

Then Lou – er, Marinoff – sent me the book, published last year, and a wad of clippings. Major break-page pieces from the New York Times, San Francisco Examiner, Philadelphia Enquirer, Page A-1 of the Los Angeles Times, and a big piece from The Times of London (its masthead sly'ly affixed to make it look like a Page 1 item). He informed me that the book is being translated into 15 languages, and that the French edition (Platon, Pas Prozac!) is being launched to coincide with a lecture he will give here at Lower Canada College on Thursday.

"In a nutshell," he wrote in his letter to me, "the story is that philosophical practice – using philosophy outside the academy, as a professional counseling and consulting tool – is fomenting both a cultural renaissance and a global revolution in thought. Our message is simple: life is not a disease. Philosophy provides valuable ways to manage ordinary problems – and is a time-tested guide to the art of living."

I've never thought of living as an "art" – to me, it's always been an unholy mess. But never mind; Marinoff

> **"I've never thought of living as an 'art' – to me, it's always been an unholy mess."**
> *Juan Rodriguez*

grabbed me with the "opportunity to break" this story in Canada: "Your book is equally compelling: A leader of the American wing of the movement, and a pioneer of the global movement. ... I grew up in Côte St. Luc, graduated Lower Canada College and Dawson College, took a first degree [in mathematical physics] at Concordia, dropped out of McGill twice, and embarked on a wonderful journey that has led me to New York and all this. My mother still lives in Montreal, as does my 18-year-old son, and I maintain deep affection for the city as well as pride in my roots there."

Marinoff's parents took him to psychiatrists as a child because he was misbehaving in school (he was eventually put forward a grade). He spent much of his 20s wandering about as a poet, classical guitarist and proverbial "dharma bum," eventually ending up studying the philosophy of science at University College, London, and earning a doctorate in decision theory. He's now a professor of philosophy at City College in New York.

One thing is certain: he gives good quote. To wit (as gleaned from the reams of clippings he sent me):

"Traditional therapy can be an endless dialogue, where you feel you have to tell everything about yourself to your therapist. I don't care what you did when you were 4." And: "We are not like the guys in white coats." And: "Our clients are refugees from psychotherapy." And: "If you go to the psychiatrist..he's going to find something wrong with you. If he doesn't find something wrong with you, he's out of business." And: "Half of [psychologists] invent syndromes, and the other half conduct experiments to affirm these imaginings." And: "The idea that every personal problem is a mental illness is itself a mental illness!"

Continued on Page C2

Fuzzy thinking keeps marijuana illegal

MORDECAI RICHLER

The common-sense campaign to decriminalize marijuana use surfaced briefly in London recently, and then sank, no more than a three-day wonder. The original British newspaper campaign for decriminalization was launched here a couple of years ago by the left-wing Independent, its stance supported by many writers, scientists and police officers, most of them names to conjure with. And then this spring the more influential, far from fellow-traveling Daily Telegraph briefly brandished the sanity torch, unavailingly, also.

Looking homeward, I doubt that Jean Chrétien, celebrated savant of Middle Eastern affairs – or, conversely, aging vaudevillian touring long past his due date – will advocate decriminalization in his next, eagerly awaited little red book of promises to be broken. Joe Clark could possibly see the point of drug policy reform, but, as things stand, he appears to be obsessed with his lawsuit aimed at preventing the Alliance gang from including "Conservative" in their full-blown party name. Just in case Joe is unaware of his lawsuit's comic potential, I should remind him of an earlier conflict over name rights. When the Marx Brothers were about to make a movie called A Night in Casablanca, there were threats of legal action from Warner Brothers, who five years earlier had made a famous flick called, simply, Casablanca, with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. Groucho, speaking for his brothers, immediately dispatched a letter to Jack Warner:

"Dear Warner Brothers," he wrote, "You claim you own Casablanca and that nobody else can use that name without your permission. What about 'Warner Brothers'? Do you own that, too? You probably have the right to use the name Warner, but what about Brothers? Professionally, we were brothers long before you were. We were touring the sticks as the Marx Brothers when Vitaphone was still a gleam in the inventor's eye, and even before that there had been other brothers – the Smith Brothers; the Brothers Karamazov; Dan Brothers, an outfielder with Detroit; and 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?' (This was originally 'Brothers, Can You Spare a Dime?' but this was spreading a dime pretty thin, so they threw out one brother, gave all the money to the other one and whittled it down to, 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?'"

That leaves us with the born-again Deformers, aka Alliance, and I'm certainly not counting on Preston Manning, Tom Long or Stockwell Day to take up the cause. Day, memorably skewered in some Toronto Star columns by Dalton Camp, that most intelligent and engaging of Tories, is of course a special case. Put plainly, if he gets to be the one who molds the CRAPPERS election platform, I will be looking for a flat-tax offer to benefit the truly rich, a referendum on hanging to please the most goofy of his supporters, and just possibly a school system that will answer to God and the Bible, and will surely not teach evolution. Day, who considers Of Mice and Men to be a dirty book, obviously has no redeeming social value and will no doubt eventually be consigned to whatever level of hell is reserved for narrow fundamentalists. I should point out that fundamentalism (whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim) is not, like homosexuality, implicit in a man's genes, but is a matter of personal choice.

As I have written in this column before, it is as ridiculous to treat marijuana use as criminal as it was to impose Prohibition on the United States in 1919. Marijuana is readily available in any bar I have ever been to in Montreal or Toronto, not that I make a habit of frequenting such sleazy venues. Stockbrokers and accountants will continue to smoke it, illegal or not. According to most medical authorities, it is less harmful than tobacco or booze.

As things stand, Western small farmers appear to be in constant need of government grants. Legalizing marijuana could be their salvation as well as making for a tax bonanza for Paul Martin. Why, just consider the brand names resourceful Westerners could make available. Manitoba Mamma. Sachet of Saskatoon. Alberta Gold. Even as that unappreciated social do-gooder Sam Bronfman once rode to the rescue of parched American imbibers, so a latter-day Canadian Samaritan could provide for our deprived neighbours to the south, incidentally founding a fortune.

Go for it, Canada.

JOE SCHWARCZ C5 ✦ DAVE BARRY C5 ✦ WHAT'S ON C6 ✦ SOAPS C9 ✦ THE SIMPSONS C10

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